

"Nobody's Business..." Creates Ethical Dilemmas

Alpha Company is given the mission of taking Hill #81 and a plan must be put together quickly. That's "Officer Business."

Specialist Jones is having difficulty qualifying on the M-16 range. That's "NCO Business."

The office needs another storage cabinet and your boss wants you to get one by tomorrow no matter what you have to do. You and your boss both know that you've been trying every legitimate way to get one, but the only route left involves bending or breaking the rules. Nobody should do it because it's "Nobody's Business."

By MSG Jack D'Amato

Nobody talks about them. The acts that fall into the domain of "Nobody's Business" are acts that involve stealing or cheating or lying or something else unethical—but NCOs are often pressured or shamed into doing things that are just plain *wrong*.

We NCOs know what to do in combat when given an unlawful order. But, in peacetime garrison and field settings, ethical problems are more subtle, if not more prevalent.

My first exposure to the pressure on leaders to do whatever is necessary came in basic training. I was the platoon leader of 2nd Platoon and the drill sergeant called me aside and pointed out that we needed more cleaning mops.

After I asked about how to get more, the DI would only say that 3rd Platoon had some stored in unlocked wall lockers outside their barracks. When I asked if he wanted me to "steal" the mops, he simply repeated that they had mops.

I didn't take them, but two days later the mops "appeared" and someone else was made platoon leader. Two others moved into squad leader positions. The DI's lesson was clear to me and the rest of the platoon members—"NCOs get the job done no matter what."

Throughout my career, I've seen the same kind of attitude. Officers with 10 vehicles "deadlined" in the motor pool

would "shape" their reports to reflect 100-percent readiness. Unit leadership was going to *look* as if it were combat ready. We became an Army—on paper anyway—which was always made up of 100-percent-ready units.

NCOs bowed to the same or greater pressure. Faced with the old IG inspections, they "borrowed" tools from other units to pass inspection. Anything they didn't want inspectors to find they hid in cars, dumpsters or out of the company area.

The best way to handle some of these situations is, to borrow a phrase, "Just say 'no.'" Courage and candor are sup-

...we ought to work to develop an environment where NCOs can "fail," or where the mission is accomplished, but the "Can Do" attitude is replaced by the "Can Do, But Do It the Right Way" attitude.

posed to be our strengths. If needed, NCOs can follow-up that negative response with an explanation and stand their ground or look to the chain of command if pressed. They can also go back and re-teach or reemphasize the "Army Professional Ethic" section in FM 22-100, *Military Leadership*.

It's been my experience that the chain of command or the NCO support channel may need to be called upon for guidance, particularly with superiors who look unkindly on any form of "no." We need to show our NCOs how to employ some tact as well.

We need to teach junior leaders how to change the system if that's the problem, or how to put off that suspense or perhaps simply how to look at a situation and develop other ways to accomplish the mission. If we teach and reward them for creative thinking and problem solving, it will not only help them make the right peacetime garrison decisions, it'll also help them be better thinkers on the battlefield. That's a mark of good leadership and good follower-ship, too.

NCOs who did whatever it was they thought was necessary weren't circumventing the system—it *was* the system. Although some changes have been made to encourage honesty and accept less than 100-percent-readiness reports, the old mentality still hangs on, especially in the NCO Corps. After all, aren't we "The Backbone of the Army" and don't we "Get Things Done?"

Too often today those terms are used inappropriately to goad or pressure NCOs into something they shouldn't be doing.

"War stories" abound about NCOs who requested and received equipment for one purpose and used it for another or took funds meant for one activity and spent it on another—NCOs who swapped or "borrowed"—others who tricked or stole. It was always for a "good cause," and rarely did the NCO benefit directly. Mission accomplishment was the goal and "the ends justified the means."

To some, those NCOs are heroes and are spoken of in reverent, almost legendary terms. The more outrageous the act, the more legendary the status. The bigger the trick or deception, the greater the praise. Above all, an NCO was expected to be a master scrounger, a system-manipulator and a wheeler-dealer.

As long as the NCO came through with the goods, he or she was judged in large part on those abilities. That skewed and corrupt attitude is still out there and it's being passed on to junior NCOs everyday in words and deeds. We need to teach our young NCOs that if it can't be

done within the system, if it can't be done legally and ethically, then it doesn't need to be done.

Most of all we need to teach them not to be shamed into doing something because they are trying to live up to the image of an NCO who *always, always* gets it done, right or wrong.

The atmosphere in the Army, from corps down to sections, also has a lot to do with what kinds of decisions our NCOs make daily. Units that live by the strictest of "Can Do" codes and don't allow failure or an NCO to say "no," have

I can remember in a recent assignment, being asked to find a ladder when no ladders could be found. The "NCOs Make It Happen" line was tacked on somewhere at the end of the request for me to find one. When I did find one through a buddy of mine, my boss gave me a wink and knowing smile and said, "Sarge, I don't even want to know where you got it."

NCOs living in fear rather than growing.

We must refuse to promote a mindset and philosophy that goes against the honor, honesty and commitment to high ideals the NCO Corps should stand for. We must realize, finally, that every unethical act done by one of us diminishes all of us.

We ought to work to develop an environment where NCOs can "fail," or where the mission is accomplished, but the "Can Do" attitude is replaced by the "Can Do, But Do It the Right Way" attitude.

Being the backbone of the Army means having the "backbone" to recognize that some things are "Officer Business," some things are "NCO Business," and some things are "Nobody's Business." ■

D'Amato is public affairs NCOIC, U.S. Army Pacific, Schofield Barracks, HI.

From the Publisher...

'Magic' Standards and The East German Visitor

It's self-evident in our Army that leaders who set and enforce high standards also take the lead in the race to build and sustain combat ready units. *Spend five minutes in a unit and you will know if leaders are setting the example, establishing and enforcing high standards and holding all concerned accountable.*

Leaders in our Army measure their performance and the performance of others in terms of standards. We urge junior leaders and soldiers to "perform to standard" and "train to standard." Leaders are apt to compliment and counsel soldiers, other leaders and units by saying they performed or did not perform to standard. In fact, we talk about it so much we run the risk of forgetting that the habit of always performing to standard is a *power packed* habit.

A short anecdote illustrates the point.

In the summer of 1991, the Sergeants Major Academy hosted a German Forces Noncommissioned Officer conference. One of the conferees, a former East German Army Sergeant Major, spoke to students in the resident Sergeants Major Course.

He told us we were the first American soldiers he had met or seen in over 19 years of military service. He talked about the East German Army, his new job as a Bundeswehr Master Sergeant, and answered student questions. Most of our questions reflected our interest in hearing what a former adversary thought of us and our Army.

The final question came from a Sergeants Major Course student who asked our guest what his leaders told him about the morale and discipline of American soldiers. The former East German Sergeant Major said all East German soldiers

believed that American morale and discipline were poor and the only thing holding American soldiers in their units was the threat of severe punishment.

Then he startled all of us with the following statement.

"I see now that is not true. As I sit here in front of you, I can see you are professional. You look physically fit. You have good haircuts, neat uniforms, polished boots and excellent military bearing. Your questions are good. Your military knowledge and understanding of important things happening in the rest of the world are impressive. *I am struck by the high standards practiced by the sergeants in your armed forces. I will take these standards back with me to my place of duty in the former East and try to make them work there.*

Amazing! *In less than 45 minutes of exposure to a group of American Noncommissioned Officers, our guest abandoned 19 years of prejudice toward American soldiers.*

What happened? He came face-to-face with a corps of professionals who made it a day-to-day habit to set personal examples in matters of *character, courage, commitment, competence and candor*. The confidence and competence was evident. The confrontation produced a significant emotional event for our visitor. The result was a change of attitude; one that wiped out 19 years of accumulated half truths.

Those of us who attended that lecture, left the auditorium feeling much better about ourselves and our Army. We also came away from the experience with the born-again belief that any tool which can tear down 19 years of prejudice in less than 45 minutes is worth carrying around in a leader's rucksack.

Establish, practice and enforce high standards. Magic! ■